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Thriving Rural Churches in the Context of Decline

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Abstract

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Rural Churches across the United States are facing a critical challenge. With shrinking populations, increased poverty, and declining religious membership, many congregations struggle to fulfill their mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ. This has led to the closure of many churches. But there is hope. A new approach to the mission of making disciples is essential to address this issue and ensure the vitality of rural Churches.

This paper explores the critical aspects of leadership, community witness, and outreach that contribute to the stability and growth of rural Churches. The role of leadership within the Church is crucial, including church leadership, community leadership, and youth leadership. Strong and visionary leaders are essential in guiding rural congregations toward a thriving future.

Moreover, the paper emphasizes the significance of sustaining ministry practices and fostering spiritual depth within rural Churches. By actively engaging with the community and embodying the values of empathy, understanding, and commitment, rural Churches can strengthen social bonds and empower their members to serve as witnesses of God's love.

The importance of community outreach is also highlighted, mainly through prayer life and pastoral care. By prioritizing prayer and cultivating a flourishing church environment, rural Churches can create a supportive and nurturing community that attracts and retains members.

In conclusion, the paper underscores the need for rural Churches to adapt and innovate in response to their challenges. By reimagining their approach to making disciples and investing in effective leadership, community engagement, and outreach efforts, rural Churches can thrive and continue to spread the message of Jesus Christ in their communities.

Thriving Rural Churches in the Context of Decline

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I. INTRODUCTION

The shrinking populations, increased poverty within rural communities, and declining religious membership in the United States have impacted the local rural congregation's mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ. Therefore, as the rural churches continue the practices of relational ministry, spiritual depth, and outreach to the community, they will ensure that the church flourishes in the future. For this paper, I define “flourishing” as a church that sustains membership growth over time. Additionally, the flourishing church has a strong sense of history, and its members have a strong influence and presence in the community.

So, to have churches thrive in rural communities, religious and community leaders must be willing to invest in these communities, which include the youth, and provide resources that will improve the growth of the rural church. Brief examples of resources for rural church growth include community engagement programs tailored to local needs, technology for broader outreach, and evangelism training to empower members to share their faith. Additionally, ongoing spiritual growth opportunities like Bible studies and workshops are provided. Lastly, prayer and spiritual support promote unity and resilience, bolstering growth and outreach.

Over the years, rural communities have witnessed a gradual decline in population as individuals migrate to urban areas in pursuit of better job prospects, higher education, and a more affluent lifestyle. Concurrently, there exists a pervasive trend of diminishing religious affiliation across the United States, which has profound implications for rural churches. This trend is compounded by the rising number of individuals disengaging from traditional denominational structures or opting out of church attendance altogether.

Against this backdrop, the project's audience is directed towards members of the Parrish Relation Council (PRC) / Administrative board and members of the congregation of the three

rural churches situated in Olpe and Madison, Kansas: The Olpe United Methodist Church, Ebenezer Global Methodist Church (Ebenezer United Methodist), and Madison Global Methodist Church (Madison United Methodist). Nestled respectively in Lyon and Greenwood Counties, these churches grapple with the effects of declining membership, mirroring a broader trend observed across rural America.

The project's innovation showcases the enduring resilience of rural churches, demonstrating their capacity to thrive despite declining membership.

The project utilized the enduring resilience of rural churches as its innovation, highlighting their ability to flourish despite declining membership.

Qualitative research, which serves as the foundation of the project, includes observations, interviews with members of the three rural churches, surveys, and focus group discussions after the surveys. They offer an exploratory and subjective lens through which to comprehend the nuanced dynamics at play. Observations, interviews, surveys, and focus groups emerged as indispensable tools conducted across all three churches, affording invaluable insights to unravel the intricacies of their flourishing.

The Olpe United Methodist Church, Ebenezer United Methodist Church (Ebenezer Global Methodist), and Madison United Methodist Church (Madison Global Methodist) are in Lyon and Greenwood Counties, Kansas, respectively. These three churches are involved in their various communities and consistently find ways to impact their communities through outreach programs, community engagements, and collaboration with other churches. Regardless of the decline in membership, these rural churches still impact their communities, where the church is the central point of the community. During the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, the local church

was the place that attracted all the people within the community and served as a spiritual center. During the period from 1985 to 1995, the Olpe United Methodist Church experienced a notable growth in membership, increasing from 20 to 30 members. Notably, the church created activities for the youth in the community, and having the youth involved, the parents of the youth also began to attend the church activities.

So, with the various church activities attracting youth and families, a social network develops within the community, leading to membership growth accompanied by a consistent rise in youth membership, indicating a positive trend in community engagement and participation. In essence, the impact on families and community networks led to membership growth. More of the youth activities will be discussed further in the paper. Additionally, from 1995 to 2005, Madison and Ebenezer Global Methodist Churches witnessed a commendable 20 percent increase in their membership, reflecting sustained growth and perhaps the effectiveness of their outreach initiatives. However, most of that changed because of the decline in membership from 2005 to 2019.

This paper delves into the intricate dynamics of three rural congregations in Kansas, analyzing the factors contributing to their declining membership and the impact of local missions undertaken by these churches. It further examines strategies for rural churches to navigate the challenge of declining membership and foster flourishing communities amidst adverse circumstances. It explores how these churches can adapt and thrive despite membership declines through discussions on various aspects such as leadership, which include church, community, and youth leadership engagement. Exploring community witness involving sustained ministry practices, spiritual depth, and outreach to the community through pastoral care. The paper aims

to provide valuable insights into cultivating resilience and vitality within rural churches, ultimately promoting their flourishing and continued relevance in serving their communities.

II. OVERVIEW OF MINISTRY CONTEXT

The author, Rockwell C. Smith, states, “People everywhere need one another, and where population density is so low that there are only a few people per square mile, their interdependence increases (Smith 1959, 37).” In this quote, Rockwell C. Smith highlights the concept of interdependence within sparsely populated areas. He suggests that in regions with very few people spread out over a large area (low population density), individuals become more reliant on one another for various aspects of daily life. This heightened interdependence arises out of necessity, as individuals recognize that they cannot thrive or sustain their way of life in isolation. This is where the rural churches play a vital role in the community. Hence, the communities of Olpe and Madison in rural Kansas are no exception.

The Olpe United Methodist Church, Ebenezer United Methodist Church (Ebenezer Global Methodist), and Madison United Methodist Church (Madison Global Methodist) are in Lyon and Greenwood Counties, Kansas, respectively. These churches are in the Flint Hills area south of Emporia on Highway 99. Both communities' socioeconomic structures comprise farmers, ranchers, oil wells, and professionals. The surrounding area is predominantly farmland in rural Kansas, and the people are warm, friendly, and welcoming to outsiders.

However, according to the World Population Review, Olpe has a 2023 population of 507. Olpe is currently declining at a rate of -0.59% annually, and its population has decreased by -1.74% since the most recent census, which recorded a population of 516 in 2020 (“Olpe, Kansas Population 2023” 2023). Madison's population is higher at 670 as of 2023; it is also currently declining at a rate of -0.89% annually, and its (Mather 2018, 21) population has decreased by -

2.62% since the most recent census, which recorded a population of 688 in 2020 (“Madison, Kansas Population 2023” 2023).

As discussed above, the similarity between Olpe and Madison is the decreased population, which has affected the decline in church membership. The decrease in population is one factor responsible for the decline in church membership. Other factors include young people going off to college and not returning, older members leaving to be close to their children who move to the city, and non-churchgoers or those who decided not to return since the Covid crisis. These factors have contributed to the decline in membership of the Olpe United Methodist Church and the Madison Global Methodist Church (formerly UMC).

As the churches navigate the challenges of declining membership, they find resilience and strength in their unique community dynamics. These unique community dynamics include close-knit families and social networks that form the backbone of rural life. Additionally, churches derive strength from entrenched cultural traditions, exemplified by religious festivities and communal gatherings, which serve to bolster social unity and a shared sense of identity.

These connections are forged through shared experiences, mutual interests, and a profound sense of belonging. They stem from two essential factors: interdependence and familial ties through marriage, which play pivotal roles in enabling these churches to flourish and thrive despite declining membership. Interdependence is heightened within these churches as individuals demonstrate care and support for fellow members and the wider community, fostering a culture of mutual assistance and solidarity. Through interdependence, these churches expressed the love of God by caring for each other and those in need. They support the various schools and provide support to the various organizations within the Olpe and Madison communities. For example, following a discussion with members of Madison Global Methodist

Church about assisting children in need of undergarments at the elementary school, they generously donated undergarments for the children. Also, both churches continue to support the local food banks. Similarly, in the Olpe community, Ebenezer Methodist Church extends assistance to community members through its compassion fund.

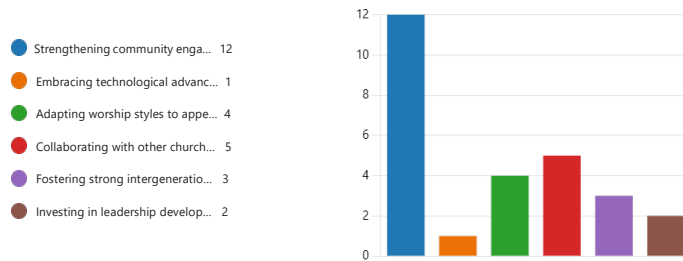
Next, the enduring relationships forged through marriage and friendship serve as pillars of strength for these churches, instilling a deep-seated commitment to community care and the propagation of God's love. This is mainly the foundational pillar of support, resilience, and a strong sense of interconnectedness that lies in support and encouragement within the church and community.

a. Ministry Project

The project focuses on three rural areas: Olpe United Methodist Church, Ebenezer Global Methodist Church (formerly Ebenezer United Methodist), and Madison Global Methodist Church (formerly Madison United Methodist) in Lyon and Greenwood counties. It aims to uncover challenges facing rural churches that lead to declining membership while highlighting triumphs that enable select congregations to thrive against all odds. Although collectively termed "rural churches," specific ministry highlights may prompt individual mention. The study employs diverse research methodologies, such as qualitative research, that offer an exploratory and subjective approach, allowing an in-depth understanding of specific groups within their unique contexts. Additionally, through observations, interviews, surveys, and focus groups, the study explores factors enabling these churches to thrive amidst adversity. While the foundational mission of rural churches centers on making disciples of Jesus Christ, economic strain, an aging congregation, and competition from alternative leisure pursuits pose significant hurdles.

As the new Pastor, I extensively assessed these challenges through survey questions and observations of church attendance over six months. Some of the questions included attendance prior to the Pandemic, the method used to reach out to members not attending Church prior to COVID-19, some possible reasons membership is declining, and the impact of some of the outreach ministries, such as media/digital ministry, spirituality, and men's ministry. The questions' results indicated that attendance before the pandemic was moderate, averaging 50 - 60 people attending worship over all three rural churches. Also, reaching out was through visitation and phone calls; however, visitations were more effective. People are very cautious in visiting members because of the COVID-19 fear. The impact of outreach ministries is low compared to the past. The reason was that not many people were willing to volunteer, and those volunteering were getting burned out.

Also, the author's immersion into church and community life revealed a trend: secular engagements thrived while church attendance lagged. However, interviews uncovered a steadfast cohort of faithful congregants committed to worship and community service, embodying resilience. Another focus group discussion was held with those in regular attendance on three different occasions after worship service. During one of the discussions, a member stated the importance of realigning the priorities of the outreach ministry to become more relevant in the community. For example, the survey question asked about what strategies rural churches could adopt to thrive despite the challenges of membership decline. The answer below indicates that the majority of the 27 participants selected strengthen community engagement.



Follow-up surveys gleaned further insights, highlighting factors like religious beliefs, community, spiritual fulfillment, and service. For example, questions about how religious beliefs impact daily life and interactions within the community. Of the 27 participants, the majority stated that the answer provided was high. Additionally, similar questions were asked about community engagement, spiritual fulfillment, and service; of the three answers provided, low, moderate, and high, most of the 27 participants scored high. The participants measure them through additional questions. For example, community engagement and service were measured by asking participants how often they volunteer and participate in local events, both past and present. Also, some participants indicated that they tracked their volunteer hours and participation in charitable projects. The spiritual fulfillment was based on integrated self-reporting on their faith connections, spiritual practices such as frequency of prayers, and worship attendance, which was asked in the questionnaire. Overall, through the questionnaire, discussion groups, and overall observations, the author gained some insight and moved forward with the project.

These findings drove strategic intervention, revitalizing ministries and programs through collaboration and innovation. Some of the innovations included worship beyond walls. This initiative was to take the church to the community by worshiping on the lawn, weather permitting. Rebranding through advertising the All-Gods Children after-school program initiative fosters community engagement with the Lions Club and American Legions and becomes

intentional in collaborating with churches in the community. These innovations were launched to ensure these rural churches continued to thrive and flourish.

b. Madison Global Methodist Church (formerly United Methodist)

Within this context of interconnectedness, the Madison Global Methodist Church (formerly United Methodist) was founded in 1874 as a Methodist protestant and later in 1877 as a Methodist Episcopal Church. Over the last 149 years, the Madison Global Methodist Church has undergone many changes, and they have exemplified the rich heritage and adaptive spirit that have characterized rural congregations over the decades. Madison UMC partnered with Ebenezer United Methodist Church (now Global Methodist) on two occasions, functioning as a two-point charge. Throughout 1974-1985 and 1985-2023, they shared pastoral leadership with Ebenezer and Olpe Methodist Churches while demonstrating a robust commitment to community ministry. Their significant contributions included over 4,000 volunteer hours at local food pantries and organizations and donations exceeding \$100,000 towards community development projects and charities. With active youth groups and men's and women's ministries, Madison UMC played a pivotal role in the Madison community. Collaborating with other churches, they supported local food pantries and organized outreach programs to assist the less fortunate. Their annual vacation Bible school and ongoing support for various local charities fostered a strong sense of purpose and belonging among members of the Madison Methodist Church.

Another significant factor in the church's activity during that time was the success of the Madison community itself during the decades of the 60s, '70s, and '80s. Madison's community was known for having oil wells during the booming oil prices. During this period, Madison was one of the few cities in rural Kansas to have a movie theater, car dealership, and local pharmacy. People came to the city because of the economic and church membership growth during those

years. Later in the decade of 2000, the situation took a downward turn. Most businesses closed, and the population declined, affecting the church's membership. Presently, Madison City seems to be in a recovery stage, with some community members starting to open new businesses, including restaurants and activities for tourist attractions. The Madison Methodist Church lost most of its members during the decade of 2000, either through death, some moving out of town for better job opportunities, colleges, or joining other churches within the communities. However, despite the decrease in the church membership, Madison Methodist Church has not lost its purpose of caring for its members and those in the community by supporting organizations in the Madison community, collaborating with other churches to conduct Vacation Bible School, supporting the local food pantry, and other charitable events.

c. Olpe United Methodist Church

Similarly, the history of Olpe United Methodist Church, dating back to its establishment in 1898 as a church and Sunday school, exemplifies a tradition of faith and community engagement that has endured through the years. The Olpe Methodist Church was the only Methodist Church in the town of Olpe until 1968 when the United Methodist Church was organized. The Ebenezer Evangelical United Brethren became part of the United Methodist Church in 1968, and from 1970 to 1971, they voted to merge with the Olpe United Methodist Church. The merger meant the Olpe United Methodist Church pastor would serve the Ebenezer (Olpe) United Methodist Church (now Global Methodist). Olpe United Methodist and Ebenezer (Olpe) remained together until 1985, when Ebenezer (Olpe) separated and joined with Madison United Methodist and became a two-point charge.

Olpe United Methodist Church remains deeply engaged in serving the community through various ministries, including the youth group and All God's Children, an after-school

program. Additionally, the church hosts the Third Saturday Supper, a cherished gathering where community members convene for a meal provided by the church. Furthermore, the church hosts a fifth Sunday sing-along that fosters community cohesion through shared music and worship. Through these diverse activities, Olpe United Methodist Church has emerged as a steadfast pillar of support and unity within the community.

Carl S. Dudley, in his book *Effective Small Churches in the Twenty-first Century*, states, "Small churches are tenacious. Some would call them tough. They do not give up when faced with impossible problems" (Dudley 2002, 25). Here, Dudley highlights the resilience and fortitude inherent in small churches. He emphasizes their refusal to surrender when confronted with seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The small rural churches have tenacity due to their close-knit communities, a deep sense of purpose, and adaptability. Dudley's statement is true because of their resilience, which comes from their strong commitment to their mission and belief that no problem is insurmountable. Additionally, their enduring spirit empowers them to weather storms and continue making meaningful impacts in their communities.

Hence, the connection highlights the enduring spirit of these rural churches, demonstrating how, despite facing a decline in membership, they continue to thrive and flourish in the face of adversity.

The Olpe United Methodist Church fits the characterization of an influential small church because it continues to thrive despite its various challenges. The membership of Olpe United Methodist Church grew steadily from 1985 to about 1995, and by late 1990 to 2000, the membership started to decline, but the congregation continued to support the Olpe community with its various ministries. Between 2018 and 2019, the pastor retired, and Olpe United Methodist Church could not hire a full-time pastor. Hence, the church voted to become part of

the Madison and Ebenezer United Methodist Churches, which became a three-point charge. Olpe United Methodist Church became a three-point charge in 2019 and continues to serve the community. So, by 2023, it returned to becoming a single congregation when Madison and Ebenezer (Olpe) United Methodist Churches disaffiliated from the United Methodist Church and became Global Methodist. The Olpe United Methodist Church continues to exhibit resilience in its dedication to serving God and the community despite significant declines in membership and specific community ministries such as outreach programs for seniors, youth ministries, food pantry services, and widows' ministries.

Despite a notable decline in membership, the Madison United Methodist Church (now Global Methodist) and the Olpe United Methodist Church remain resilient in their commitment to ministry. I argue that while these congregations encounter challenges in attracting new members, they possess the potential to revitalize their outreach through strategic shifts in ministry focus. These churches can ignite excitement and foster incremental growth within their communities by implementing intentional changes and introducing existing programs with renewed enthusiasm. Collaborative efforts between community and church leadership are essential in effecting gradual yet meaningful changes that resonate with congregants and the broader community.

III. LEADERSHIP

In every thriving church community, leadership plays a central role in shaping its path and impact. Leadership embodies the capacity to inspire, influence, and guide others toward shared goals and visions, underpinned by integrity, empathy, communication, decisiveness, and adaptability. Effective leadership is indispensable for steering church governance, fostering community engagement, and nurturing youth development. Rural churches rely on effective

leadership across church, community, and youth domains to survive and thrive amidst adversity. Particularly crucial is cultivating the youth—the newest leaders—whose development is utmost for the sustained vitality of the church and the wider community. In the subsequent sections, we will delve into three facets of leadership: church, community, and youth. Leadership emerged as a central theme in the survey and focus group sessions across all three rural churches.

Approximately 53 percent of the 75 participants emphasized the critical importance of solid leadership and vision for the success of a rural church.

a. Church Leadership

Amiel Osmaston defines church leadership as “enabling a body of people to live, grow, and journey together in a way that serves God’s mission in a particular place” (Bell et al. 2009, 57). Osmaston’s definition underscores the importance of leadership in nurturing a vibrant and thriving church community. It is essential to address challenges such as declining membership and ensure the church's continued relevance and impact in its particular context. The definition emphasizes the role of leaders in fostering a community that lives, grows, and journeys together in service of God's mission. So, church leadership includes clergy, pastoral staff, and lay leaders who provide members with vision, guidance, and support. They foster a sense of unity, facilitate decision-making processes, and ensure the fulfillment of the church's mission and values.

Leadership within rural churches and communities is indispensable for the growth and vitality of congregations, as both entities share a vested interest in the well-being of the community at large. In rural communities, churches exhibit distinctive traits like strong community camaraderie and a deep commitment to caring for one another, which further underscore their significance within these settings.

In the context of declining church membership, the capacity to address the needs of both individuals and the community becomes increasingly crucial promptly and efficiently. Randy Stephens states, “The small church, as a general rule, can respond more quickly than a larger one to an individual or community need” (Stephens 1989, 76). His statement underscores the agility of small churches in addressing individual and communal needs promptly. Stephens' assertion underscores the importance of rural church leadership in responding effectively to the challenges of declining membership, highlighting the vital role that community care and engagement play in sustaining a thriving church presence in rural areas. So, the pivotal role of rural church leadership in community care and engagement is vital to a thriving church amid membership decline.

At the heart of rural church leadership lies the Pastor, whose leadership sets the tone for the congregation's path to sustained membership. The Pastor's spiritual depth and engagement with the community are paramount, necessitating flexibility and adaptability in navigating the multifaceted demands of rural ministry. Collaborative efforts with local organizations and fellow churches strengthen the impact of rural church initiatives, fostering a sense of unity and collective action toward community betterment. As spiritual guides, Pastors provide pastoral care and chart a vision for spiritual and community growth, catalyzing strategic shifts and outreach efforts to meet evolving community needs.

As Pastor, I led by organizing a focus group discussion involving members from all three rural churches. The aim was to solicit ideas on effectively reaching out to the community and those members who had ceased attending worship. I proposed the concept of conducting home visits to reconnect with absent members and holding outdoor worship sessions on the church lawn once a month. These suggestions received support from the congregations. Although we

had to suspend the lawn worship sessions during the fall and winter seasons, the focus group evaluated the outcome, and the initiative contributed to fostering a sense of unity and fellowship among the congregation.

b. Community Leadership

Lawrence Farris aptly highlights the foundational role of community-building in Jesus's ministry, underscoring the significance of fostering a cohesive and inclusive fellowship within rural congregations facing membership decline. He states, "It is well to remember that Jesus's first act of ministry was to call the disciples----in other words, to create a community " (Farris 2000, 54)." He further indicates that it "should be the primary activity of the Minister" (Farris 2000, 54). Farris's statement implies that ministers should prioritize activities and initiatives that strengthen interpersonal connections, promote fellowship, and foster a sense of belonging among members. The rural church can create an environment where individuals feel valued and supported by prioritizing community-building efforts. However, ministers cannot do it alone; they must collaborate with community leaders.

So, while ministers play a central role in fostering community within the church, Farris underscores the active participation of community leaders in creating and sustaining the rural church community, particularly in the context of declining church membership. Although community leaders may not be church members or have significant roles, they foster a strong connection between the church and the community through collaborations with local organizations and engaging in outreach programs.

As the Pastor overseeing all three rural churches in Madison and Olpe, the churches collaborated with the Lions Club to provide assistance for students and assist with initiative within the community and the church. Another example is the collaboration and support of the

church with community leaders in establishing Life Wise Academy in Madison, a non-denominational, Bible-based released time religious instruction program emphasizing character education.

Community leaders are instrumental and crucial in crisis management, collaborating with the pastor to address conflicts, financial issues, or internal matters that may impact church membership. Overall, rural community leaders serve as catalysts for positive change and growth, integral to revitalizing declining membership in rural churches through fostering community connections, addressing community needs, and adapting to changing circumstances.

c. Youth Leadership

Youth leadership in rural churches facing declining membership poses significant challenges yet holds paramount importance for the church's future. Challenges include youth migration to urban areas for work or education and a lack of interest in church involvement. Engaging youth is crucial for rural church growth, necessitating innovative programs aligned with their interests. Recognizing youth as crucial contributors to community and church development underscores the need to foster a sense of belonging and community. Pastors and rural leaders must tailor initiatives to appeal to youth, promoting inclusivity and active participation in church life. As previously mentioned, the Youth-led worship initiative is an innovative approach to fostering youth inclusivity, where young members lead worship services on one Sunday each month.

Initially, this initiative began with youth reading scripture lessons during services and gradually expanded to include leading the children's sermon and, eventually, the entire service. Moreover, efforts are made to groom youth for leadership roles within the church. Similarly, at Ebenezer Global Methodist Church, young adults are entrusted with positions of responsibility,

such as financial secretary and heading the administrative council. While these initiatives represent just a few steps toward engaging youth and young adults, they signify progress in the right direction. In planning for the future involvement of youth, the next objective is to establish intergenerational workshops where youth and adults can participate in activities, discussions, and team-building exercises together. Youth representation entails forming a youth advisory council or appointing youth representatives to existing leadership structures, providing them a platform to express their views and contribute to decision-making processes.

In conclusion, the collaboration of pastoral leadership, alongside community and youth leaders, is essential for rural churches grappling with declining membership. Together, these leaders profoundly understand the local context and foster vital connections within the community. By effectively communicating the church's mission and values and leveraging their relationships with local organizations, they address unique challenges and develop strategic plans to ensure the ongoing vitality of both the church and the community. Through their collective efforts, rural churches can navigate membership decline and continue to thrive in serving their communities.

IV. COMMUNITY WITNESS

Jeremy Martineau notes in *Reshaping Rural Ministry, A Theological and Practical Handbook*, “The rural community is blessed to be set in a natural landscape, one that is also the result of centuries of human endeavor. The church is often found at the center of these communities” (Martineau 2009, 31). His observation underscores the interconnectedness between rural communities and the churches within them. He also highlights churches' unique position as central hubs for community life and interaction.

So, community witness is the active expression of God's love within a community. It encompasses recognition and support for those facing challenges and a caring and compassionate celebration of successes. Vital for rural churches experiencing declining membership, community witness is exemplified by church members' engagement in local contexts. As members of the rural church actively witness and acknowledge the joys and struggles of those in the community, a sense of connection and solidarity is created. This form of witness extends beyond mere observation, fostering empathy, understanding, and commitment to community members' lives. By promoting social cohesion, empowerment, and resilience, community witness strengthens bonds within the rural community, enhancing its members' sense of belonging and responsibility.

Through community witness, the Olpe United Methodist Church, the Madison, and Ebenezer Global Methodist Churches continue to enhance the vibrancy of their churches. Their commitment to community witness has sustained membership and fostered grassroots initiatives, expanded ministries, and increased volunteerism, thus fulfilling the church's mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ. As they engage in community witness, such as outreach programs and adaptation of worship practices, they must begin to leverage technology, reassess some of their outreach programs, and employ essential strategies for enhancing community witness.

Community witness is unique because it goes beyond mere observation; it is critical to the lives of people in the community because it is a sense of empathy, understanding, and commitment to the lives of the people in the community. Community witness promotes social cohesion between the church and community members and encourages empowerment and resilience.

It is imperative that community members, through their witness, strengthen social bonds within the community by investing in social capital. Social capital, a "feature of social

organization, such as networks, norms, and trusts that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Francis 2012, 216), is critical to community witness. Keith Ineson and Lewis Burton indicate, "Social Capital has been developed in recent years as an analytical tool which explores the nature of social cohesiveness and the value which can be added or subtracted from social life.....” (Francis 2012, 216). The rural church members produce social capital through community witness to serve the community. Social capital entails community engagement and service, improving bonds within the congregation and extending to benefit the wider community. An example includes the members of the three rural churches volunteering at the local food bank, doing community projects, and taking meals to Seniors. The members of the three rural churches build trust, foster relationships, and create networks that solidify social cohesion and resilience. This social capital strengthens the church's role as a pillar of support and service within the community, enriching the lives of its members and the broader population. Community witness establishes a strong bond within the community, and people develop a sense of belonging and willingness to help each other.

With the investment in social capital, rural churches can pursue two primary objectives to uphold their commitment to community witness: sustaining ministry practice and nurturing spiritual depth. Sustaining ministry practices involves preserving effective initiatives to ensure continuous service to the community. Likewise, nurturing spiritual depth is essential for rural churches as they thrive amid declining membership. To illustrate a deeper understanding of community witness, a more in-depth analysis of sustaining ministry practice and spiritual depth is provided below.

a. Sustaining Ministry Practice

Kathryn Tanner, in the book *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, states in her article “Theological Reflection and Christian Practices”:

“Theologians construct systems of ideas and draw systematic connections between Christian actions and beliefs. Thus, beliefs about God and the world seamlessly suggest the propriety of certain courses of Christian action, and these actions supply the social circumstances that make those beliefs seem natural (Tanner 2002, 229).”

Tanner suggests that church members' beliefs about their faith and community lead to specific actions, such as providing various services to the community. In essence, by aligning their actions with their deeply held beliefs, rural churches can continue to serve their communities effectively and adapt to changing circumstances while remaining rooted in their faith.

Thus, Olpe United Methodist Church members perceive a natural alignment between their Christian deeds, such as their manifold community services, and their convictions, viewing them as inherent expressions of fulfilling God's will. Despite the decline in membership, the church's ministry thrives. To ensure the continual sustenance of its ministry, there must be a transition toward gradual, incremental changes over time rather than sudden transformations. This deliberate approach enables the church to uphold stability while adapting to address the evolving needs of its members and the community.

Additionally, the focus should be on providing care and support to existing congregation members and those outside the church community. This shift towards outward-focused care helps foster connections with the broader community and may attract new members over time. Although critical to longevity, the membership issue becomes secondary because the focus is on the ministry provided to the community.

The rural church needs a long-term vision to sustain the ministry over time.

In developing the long-term vision, I suggested setting goals and priorities for the church. The members of Olpe United Methodist Church, in the focus group discussion, considered the

priorities of continuous focus on the after-school program, adding the fifth Sunday sing-along to ministry, and focusing on the young people in the community by inviting them to a Saturday gathering. The goal is to reach out strategically to the community and be visible to people within the community.

Another priority is the financial stewardship of the rural church, which is also critical to sustaining the ministry. Most rural churches struggle financially because they rely on the members' tithes and offerings to support the daily expenses of the church. Meeting their essential financial responsibilities becomes challenging if the church membership begins to decline, especially considering that other rural churches are financially solvent regardless of their membership challenges, as some of these rural congregations have properties that generate income to sustain the church. Exploring alternative revenue streams, such as hosting fundraising events or renting out church facilities, can also help sustain the church financially.

The focus group discussed the issue of financial stewardship, and the author learned that all three churches were doing well in financially sustaining the church. Throughout the group discussions, the author learned that the Olpe United Methodist Church exemplifies sound financial stewardship by ensuring financial stability despite membership challenges. Its primary expense account covers the insurance portion for the annual conference, demonstrating responsible financial management. Additionally, the church diversifies its revenue sources beyond tithes and offerings, including initiatives like the Third Saturday Supper. This fundraising event invites community members to enjoy a free meal at the church, with attendees encouraged to give a love offering. The absence of a cover charge fosters generosity, resulting in contributions exceeding expectations. Another revenue stream for the church is renting out its fellowship hall at a reasonable cost, attracting community members for various events. Although

not as lucrative as the Third Saturday Supper, this rental income contributes to the church's financial stability. Lastly, generous contributions from out-of-state members connected to the church further support its financial health.

The Madison Global Methodist Church's approach to sustaining ministry practice shares similarities with, ~~yet also differs from~~, that of Olpe United Methodist Church. Both churches prioritize the mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ and utilize their existing ministry practices to achieve this goal. Additionally, they leverage their assets to support the community by sharing God's word and caring for those in need. One commonality between the two rural churches is their commitment to using their resources to serve the community. For instance, both churches engage in income-generating activities, albeit in different forms. While Olpe United Methodist Church hosts events like the Third Saturday Supper, Madison Global Methodist Church provides meals to local organizations for a fee. Furthermore, both churches demonstrate a commitment to community support through their women's ministries. In the case of Madison Global Methodist Church, the women's ministry generates income reinvested in various community projects, and the church uses its assets within the community to provide care for those in need.

Olpe United Methodist Church and Madison Global Methodist Church differ in many aspects of ministry practice. Madison Global Methodist Church lacks amenities like an after-school program and Third Saturday Supper and does not rent out its fellowship hall, unlike Olpe United Methodist Church. Instead, Madison Global Methodist Church relies on church volunteers in Madison, Kansas, for ministry support. In Madison's rural community, where five different churches exist, attracting new members proves challenging due to its close-knit nature. Consequently, gaining fresh membership is arduous, as individuals typically have affiliations

with existing churches. Moreover, involvement in various local organizations enables Madison Global Methodist Church members to understand the community's needs better. Leveraging this understanding, the church can sustain its ministry through strategic shifts in community support efforts. Thus, Madison Global Methodist Church must refine its strategic approach, considering similar programs offered by the other four rural churches in Madison.

An essential initial step is prioritizing the creation of a more intentional and welcoming atmosphere. Although Madison Global Methodist Church effectively welcomes outsiders, it must intensify efforts to engage visitors. This involves reaching out to visitors throughout the week and ensuring a warm, inclusive experience. Additionally, being intentional means following up with welcome cards and checking in with visitors, especially those in the community.

So, to create a welcoming environment, church members, including the pastor, need to make house calls and visit new members. The pastor and leadership of the Madison Global Methodist Church need to welcome new members and even the old ones who are not coming back to church intentionally. The intent is to get people to know that the church cares about them and that they are part of a family. The care and support do not end at noon once the service is over on Sunday. It extends throughout the week. The intent is to ensure that the church is inclusive to all and that exclusivity and judgment do not exist in the Madison Global Methodist Church. Also, by checking in on those who visit and those who are not coming, the Pastor and leadership team demonstrate that this is a caring church. "Caring and place are so intimately interdependent that they offer the means that most small churches use to involve their congregations in community caring and Christian witness" (Dudley 2002, 46). That is what the Madison Global Methodist Church needs to institute through its strategic shift to create an

atmosphere where everyone feels valued and accepted. The church must embrace a caring spirit for all people, especially those visiting and the members staying away.

The pastor and leadership of the Madison Global Methodist Church must become more purposeful in caring for its members. In sustaining its ministry, the Madison Global Methodist Church needs to start planning for the church's future. The church usually conducts monthly meetings, and through those meetings, the church's leadership begins to look at the long-term vision for the church, where the leadership must get with the congregations and begin to set goals and priorities. These various priorities will determine the church's trajectory and work towards those priorities that will improve the life of the church's membership growth and sustainment.

In executing the strategic shift, it is crucial for Madison Global Methodist Church to maintain connections with members who have relocated from the community for diverse reasons. Keeping in touch with them via emails and letters demonstrates the church's care for those who are inactive and residing out of state. Encouraging them to stay connected contributes to ministry sustainability at Madison Global Methodist Church.

Additionally, maintaining connections with other churches in the community further strengthens Madison Global Methodist Church's outreach efforts. For instance, Madison Global Methodist Church partners with another congregation to organize Vacation Bible School (VBS), yielding positive outcomes. While this collaboration is successful, Madison United Methodist Church should engage with the remaining three churches to host a community-wide VBS. Such collaboration would enhance outreach efforts within the community.

Also, the leadership of the Madison Global Methodist church needs to continuously develop the young people and create an opportunity to serve. Although congregation members

are older, inviting younger people into leadership development is critical to sustaining the ministry. The Madison Global Methodist Church is very good at supporting both social and Christian organizations in the community. Through their support, the church provided much-needed assistance for these organizations to thrive. Therefore, with such a connection, the Madison Global Methodist Church can become intentional by sponsoring a development program for the young people in the community.

Finally, in sustaining ministry practice, the Madison United Methodist Church must keep prayers and faith as the guiding principles and the center of the ministry. Prayer is essential because it fosters a deeper spiritual connection for individuals and the church community. Through prayer, members seek divine guidance and wisdom for decision-making, leadership direction, and navigating challenges the rural church may face. Overall, prayer is a foundational element of faith and practice in a rural church, nurturing spiritual growth, fostering community, and guiding the church's mission and ministry. As such, prayers must be constantly offered to renew and accept where God is taking the church. The ministry's sustainment rests with diligent and faithful members trusting God through prayers and spiritual renewal within the church.

b. Spiritual Depth

In his book, *Indispensable Guide for Smaller Churches*, David Ray highlights the intrinsic connection between theology and one's approach to life, emphasizing that “theological beliefs shape values, beliefs, and actions” (Ray 2009, 69). Ray asserts that spiritual depth goes beyond mere surface-level adherence to religious practices or rituals. Churches that prioritize theological education, reflection, and application are more likely to cultivate spiritual depth among their members, leading to a community that is growing in numbers and spiritual maturity and depth.

In line with this, the focus group also delved into the importance of spiritual depth within rural churches. The discussed spiritual depth encompasses their faith connection through prayer and fasting, a strong sense of purpose, and spiritual growth derived from a profound understanding of core religious principles, which are crucial for their resilience and progress amid challenges. The three rural churches have a strong sense of history, and their members have a strong influence and presence in the community. Along with sustained membership growth, a flourishing church becomes spiritually alive through spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation, fasting, and the study of religious texts, indicating the depth of spiritual life within the church community.

Rural church members' theological beliefs and spiritual depth profoundly influence their values, actions, and responses to challenges, as evidenced in the Olpe United Methodist Church, Ebenezer, and Madison Global Methodist Church practices. Thus, the theology expressed in the lives of members of rural churches like Olpe United Methodist Church, Ebenezer, and Madison Global Methodist Church guides their worship practices and community engagement efforts, reflecting a deep-rooted commitment to their faith. So, amid dealing with the significant crisis of decline in membership, the rural church thrives and sustains itself by understanding its purpose, which is nested in its theological foundation.

According to David Ray, a church grounded in solid theological beliefs can effectively address any hardship or crisis by adhering firmly to its theological foundation (Ray 2009, 70). During the conversation about spiritual depth involving members of the focus group, I discovered that the theological grounding and spiritual resilience of rural churches are vital assets for overcoming crises and obstacles. These churches rely on trust in God and prayer as guiding principles, especially when facing challenges like declining membership. The Olpe

United Methodist Church, Ebenezer, and Madison Global Methodist Church demonstrate this resilience as they confront the challenge of declining membership, relying on prayer and spiritual conviction to guide their response to the crisis.

Relying on prayer and their unwavering faith enables rural churches to discern God's direction amidst declining membership. Embracing a strategic spiritual shift centered on trusting in God, which is intrinsic to their spiritual identity, they maintain confidence that God will guide them. Recognizing the importance of spiritual depth in rural churches is crucial, as physical growth naturally follows when they deepen spiritually over time. This growth empowers them to fulfill their mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ, flourishing as they extend care and support to their community, driven by the theological beliefs of their members.

Amidst challenges, the church survives and thrives due to the theological beliefs ingrained in its members. This prompts the question: what defines the church? According to Rhodes, "the people of God gathered in the presence of Christ to do God's business by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Conder 2017, 16). Then, worship becomes the pivotal space where the Holy Spirit initiates transformative work. Thus, for rural churches to prosper, individuals must wholeheartedly devote themselves to God through worship. Consequently, rural church members must cultivate a deep commitment to serving God, relying on the Holy Spirit through worship and praise.

Worship holds immense significance, particularly for rural communities grappling with declining church membership. Amidst such challenges, worship serves as a pivotal platform for spiritual renewal and redirection. Through worship, individuals within the church community embark on a journey of reimagining God's presence in their collective life, discerning where they are being called to serve. As articulated by Smith in 'Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship

Works' Smith shared that "Christian worship culminates with a sending ("Go!") accompanied by a promise ("And as you go, you go with his blessing")--the benediction that is both a blessing and a charge, a commissioning accompanied by the promise of the spirit's presence"(Smith 2013, 152–53). Consequently, the worship experience for rural church members is deeply rooted in the belief that God, through the Holy Spirit, commissions them to serve their community. As a result, their obedience to God's will—manifested in acts of service and care for those in need—is deeply ingrained in rural churches' theological and spiritual fabric.

Finally, worship serves as a catalyst for the church's spiritual engagement with humanity, fostering meaningful relationships within the community. These relationships, characterized by trust, dialogue, and shared interests, hold transformative power, as noted by Conder and Rhodes (2017, p. 48). Through worship, members of the Madison Global Methodist Church transform the power of relationships to support the needs of community members. It is the result of having a deep spiritual belief that the church focused on the decline of membership but solely on the desire to serve God by supporting the needs of people in the community. So, worship helps the church members to have spiritual depth connected to their theological beliefs. Through worship, members of the Madison Global Methodist Church harness this transformative potential to address the needs of community members. Grounded in deep spiritual beliefs, the church remains steadfast in its commitment to serving God by attending to the needs of those around them. As a result, worship becomes a conduit for nurturing spiritual depth aligned with theological convictions, enabling the church to effectively navigate challenges such as declining membership while remaining steadfast in its mission of service and care.

V. COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Community outreach is the attempts that groups, individuals, or organizations make to engage the local community positively. The goal is intentionally connecting with the people by addressing their needs and providing support, which builds long-lasting relationships to make a positive impact. Christian community outreach demonstrates Jesus Christ's love while building relationships and caring for the physical and spiritual needs of the community. Jesus Christ commanded his disciples to go into the world and spread the gospel through the great commission found in Matthew 28:19-20. Therefore, community outreach is a command from Jesus Christ to his followers, Christians. In his book *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer indicates that "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ (Bonhoeffer 1978, 21)."

The Christian community outreach conducted by both Olpe United Methodist Church and Madison Global Methodist Church is to show Jesus Christ's love by caring for both spiritual and physical needs. The desire to express God's love through Christian community outreach is enshrined in the belief that God's love comes through the community of Christians expressing love spiritually. Bonhoeffer reminds us, "Because the Christian community is founded solely on Jesus Christ, it is a spiritual and not a psychic reality. In this, it differs absolutely from all other communities" (Bonhoeffer 1978, 31). Therefore, as a Christian community, the church extends spiritual outreach to all individuals, ensuring their physical needs are addressed and imparting the word of God through the ministry of presence.

Also, relationships are established that will attract people to the work of Christ due to the Christian outreach ministry. The church flourishes by providing support to people within the community. Hence, to flourish, the Olpe United Methodist Church and Madison Global Methodist Church conduct Christian community outreach by caring for the community's soul.

Community outreach is not to be confused with community witness. The easier way to distinguish the two is that outreach is the action taken, and witness is the result of the action. An example of the distinction between outreach and witness is observed in a community soup kitchen run by a church. The outreach would involve the church actively serving meals to those in need, organizing the logistics, and managing volunteers. On the other hand, the witness would be the impact on the meals' recipients—the sense of care and compassion they feel, the relationships built, and the positive perception of the church's role in the community.

So, how does the declining membership in the rural church connect to Christian community outreach? Through Christian community outreach, the church cultivates connections with individuals, and the assistance offered may draw some to the church over time, while others may not. The rural church needs to make a strategic shift in evangelism by involving a strategic and intentional effort to share the Christian message while respecting individual autonomy and beliefs. Presently, the form of evangelism utilized in the church is through church service and community events. Through regular church services, the gospel is preached, and newcomers are invited to experience the community of believers by giving their lives to Jesus Christ and joining the church. Likewise, churches organize events such as picnics, fairs, or concerts open to the public, providing opportunities for non-members to interact with church members and learn about faith in a relaxed environment. The rural church can employ these forms of evangelism, and sometimes, it may not necessarily attract everyone who attends these events.

Anthony Pappas says, “Small churches bring people to Christ by bringing them into the family of faith.” He says, “It is not mass evangelism, but it is very effective when it is done and when the congregation is healthy (Pappas 2001, 167).” So, through evangelism, the rural church is focused on sharing its faith and developing relationships with the people. It is through

relationships that evangelism becomes effective. The people of the community experience love from congregation members, and such love is received with open hearts. Christian community outreach is critical to attracting new members to the rural church because it allows relational opportunities by giving people the joy of fellowshiping together. Learning what is occurring at the church in the various programs or ministries will spark their attention to see what is happening.

a. Prayer Life

The cornerstone of successful Christian community outreach is intentionality, which refers to individuals' deliberate and purposeful efforts in carrying out evangelism. To embody intentionality, individuals must prioritize prayer as an integral component of their evangelistic endeavors. Royal Speidel underscores this notion, stating, "The life and health of a church are directly proportional to the prayer life of the congregation" (Speidel 2007, 57). Therefore, fostering a committed and fervent prayer life within the church is essential, as prayer catalyzes assertive evangelistic efforts.

Through prayer, the church becomes more proactive in its outreach ministry, bringing people together in solidarity as they engage in evangelism. This deliberate combination of prayer and evangelism enables small rural churches like those in Olpe and Madison to effectively spread God's love within their communities. These churches demonstrate their commitment to prayer by activating robust prayer lines whenever community members face challenges, such as health issues or bereavement. This practice extends beyond church members to include individuals in the broader community, including those outside the state.

Moreover, prayer serves as a transformative form of Christian community outreach, allowing individuals to experience Christ's love through the power of prayer. As Miroslav Volf expounds in his book *'After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity,'*

"For although according to the New Testament Christ does indeed pray for us (see Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25; 9:24; 1 John 2:1.), it is not Christ who prays through us; it is we who pray through him (see Rom. 1:8; 16:27, etc.). Moreover, this, our prayer, takes place in the Spirit (Rom. 8:15) and does so in such a way that the spirit— not Christ — prays in us (see Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:26; 1 Cor. 14:15)" (Volf 1997, 170).

Through intentional prayer-driven outreach initiatives, rural churches meet people where they are in their spiritual journey, forming meaningful relationships that gradually cultivate an appreciation for the church's love and support. Over time, this may lead to individuals desiring to become part of a compassionate Christian community.

b. Flourishing Church

The rural community is a resilient environment where individuals persevere through adversity and actively cultivate specific virtues and values. These include a deep-seated commitment to faith, fostering meaningful relationships, demonstrating compassion towards others, fostering a sense of belonging, valuing time, and embracing forbearance. Forbearance emerges as a noteworthy attribute, highlighting the community's capacity to accept and embrace one another's imperfections, fostering harmony and mutual respect. Furthermore, churches actively support the town by addressing various social and economic issues. These include poverty alleviation through initiatives such as food banks, clothing drives, and financial assistance programs. Moreover, churches undertake education initiatives and elderly care, including senior outreach programs, transportation services, and home visits.

The pastor also is no exception. The pastor must fill several roles because of the lack of administrative staff or financial strain on the rural church. Patrick B. Reyes indicates, "Finding

the balance between being a leader and being part of the community requires 'Mastery' and the intentional pursuits of one's purpose" (Reyes 2021, 96). Therefore, the pastor must master being that leader in the community and find the balance in dealing with issues.

So, with all the challenges the rural church encounters, it continues to flourish. A flourishing church has sustained membership growth over time. The church has a strong sense of history, and its members have a strong influence and presence in the community. Therefore, a flourishing church will sustain its membership over time. Also, a flourishing church will not deviate from its mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ by serving the people in the community.

Therefore, despite the challenges of declining membership, the Olpe United Methodist Church and the Madison Global Methodist church continue to thrive and flourish because of their theological belief and faith in God. These two congregations have adapted to the changing circumstances and effectively conduct community ministries. Both congregations are strategically shifting their ministry, not changing but becoming more intentional in supporting the community. They have embraced vital elements that empower them to flourish despite declining membership. These elements involve a solid spiritual foundation deeply entrenched in their faith and adept pastoral leadership that fosters and supports the congregation, particularly in times of decline. Additionally, active involvement in community events and initiatives is a cornerstone for building and strengthening connections with residents, further fortifying their bond with the community.

A critical element that allows the ministry of both congregations to thrive is their theological belief and trust in God. The faith of these congregations rests in their belief that God is in control of all things. Gordon Lathrop reminds us that "The faith in God that Christian

theology seeks to elucidate date is "the faith of the church." Though that phrase may be understood in differing ways, what is clear from the New Testament is that any Christian's faith in God is held together with other people" (Lathrop 2006; Kindle Locations 149–50). Therefore, the people come together and know that the decline in membership will not hinder their ability to share God's love through service. They have continued to move forward in supporting the community, which allows the church to flourish. It is not based on how many people attend worship on Sundays; it is mainly their desire to serve others and express God's love in the ministry of service. Therefore, the church spiritually does not look for physical growth in the way that others will come to understand growth. The church's growth is through bold planning and doing the will of God by serving others. In the rural community, church growth is not about how hard and dedicated the people are; it is all in God's time and bold planning.

The next element that will allow the church to flourish is financial sustainability. Being financially stable and able to sustain the various ministries is critical to the survivability of the rural congregation. The members of the rural congregation trust each other and know each other well, which allows a good steward of the finances. Although the church membership may be small and even declining when there is a need, the funds will become available—an example is the Olpe United Methodist Church, which needed a new fellowship hall. The church uses the front foyer as its fellowship hall. The request was presented to the congregation, money was raised, and the fellowship hall was constructed as an addition to the main church building. Anthony Papas shared that "Stewardship is more a question of will and motivation" (Pappas 2001, 153). Within the three rural churches of Olpe United Methodist Church, Madison, and Ebenezer Global Methodist Churches, if the need is identified for a specific item or repair and the church members become aware of it, they will respond enthusiastically. This was exemplified

when there was a need for undergarments, which was shared earlier. It was presented to the Madison congregation, and they contributed to the cause by assisting the young children in the community. Financial stewardship is critical, and it also helps the church support the people in the community.

Finally, the church can flourish by integrating technology during times of worship. Technology is a hard sell for rural congregations because community members do not use it daily. Yes, most people in rural areas have cell phones; however, online streaming can become challenging. However, the churches of Madison and Olpe have embraced technology, which has helped bring their worship services to people outside the rural community. The Ebenezer Global Methodist Church, located in rural Olpe, is purposefully involved with using online streaming. Technology, including live streaming, was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic and has taken a foothold in Ebenezer Global Methodist Church and Madison Global Methodist Church. Both churches have an active online streaming platform and social media. The Olpe United Methodist Church uses social media to share information but does not have online streaming.

Overall, using technology to maintain an active online presence and social media to connect with people can provide an excellent evangelistic opening for rural churches. Although it may not translate into membership, it will allow the church to become a source of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with all people. Donald McGavran reminds his readers that "Carrying on the whole program of God in the world is the mission of the Church" (McGavran 1970, 354). Therefore, through technology, rural areas flourish and thrive amid declining membership challenges. The focus is not on how many people or likes are received on social media; it is more about spreading God's love to all people beyond the community of Olpe and Madison using technological evangelism.

c. Pastoral Care

In addition to technological outreach, pastoral care plays a crucial role in the vitality of rural congregations. The role of the pastor in a rural congregation fluctuates depending on what is going on at the time. The role of the pastor in a rural congregation is multifaceted and dynamic, often surrounding various responsibilities such as administration, counseling, preaching, and even practical tasks like carpentry or grounds management. Unlike churches in bigger areas, it becomes challenging for rural churches to hire people for most of these positions. However, an advantage is that the pastor gets to meet the community's people, and they get to know the pastor quickly.

The most beneficial of all the various roles is providing pastoral care to church community members. Pastoral care for rural churches is a unique opportunity for a Pastor to establish relationships and express God's love to people experiencing various challenges. An essential element of pastoral care is mentoring others in the church and conducting evangelism. Through mentorship, the pastor provides a safe space where people can explore their desire to serve and become available to assist with various church ministries.

In approaching a church with declining membership, pastoral care becomes critical in assisting rural church members to focus on God's grace and the desire to serve. Providing pastoral care to a congregation declining membership is like caring for a grieving family. James L. Killen, Jr defined grief as "the emotional aspect of the experience of losing someone or something that has been an important part of the grieving person's life" (Killen 2005, 47). Also, grieving is not limited to the death of an individual. It can also mean declining church membership, which can cause members to begin to experience the loss of vibrancy that the church had in the past.

Through this grieving process, rural church members turn to their pastor for comfort and direction to mitigate the situation. The pastor needs to provide pastoral care to its members, guiding them through dealing with the decline. It is imperative not to focus on the problem but to find ways to listen and generate ideas to keep the church alive. For example, when providing pastoral care to a grieving person by listening and understanding their grief, the pastor needs to listen to the members and begin understanding the various programs, ministries, and activities the church is undertaking. There may need to be a strategic shift in some of its activities or ministries.

Regardless of the process, the pastor must consistently provide pastoral care to rural church members through listening and encouragement. As a congregation leader, the pastor must continue to minister to the people, providing hope amid the challenges of a declining congregation. The pastor must encourage the people to remain consistently in prayers. Pastoral counseling does not have to be only in a formal setting; it can occur through visitations, community events, and sermons. The pastor must be able to communicate pastoral counseling to the people and allow them to see the work of God in their various ministries. Trust is a commodity that can be easily destroyed if one is not careful. Therefore, pastors must maintain integrity in all their activities. Killen encourages "the church as a whole to behave in a trustworthy way and for ministers of the church to live up to the highest standards of personal and relational integrity" (Killen 2005, 87). Overall, pastoral care for a declining church membership entails listening to and guiding the ministries working for the church. The pastor must become empathetic and equally involved in working with those ministries that will sustain the membership and not move towards a quick fix.

In working with the Olpe United Methodist Church, Ebenezer, and Madison Global Methodist Churches, pastoral care was geared towards listening, observing, and then focusing on the ministries that work for both congregations. The strategic shift in the ministry was not to cut programs and ministries but to enhance them and take some new approaches. For example, the men's ministry was revitalized in both the Madison and Ebenezer Global Methodist churches, which became a success. The enhancement of some of the ministries that existed included the media ministries and getting people involved in conducting outreach programs. These ministries allow members of these churches to focus on the mission of Making Disciples of Jesus Christ and not worry about the next person coming to join the church, resulting in sustaining the membership and ensuring that the goal is Christlike in serving the community. Overall, providing pastoral care allows members of the rural church to experience the presence of God in caring for members of the community and, simultaneously, processing the grief by supporting each other through the love of Jesus Christ.

V. CONCLUSION

Rural churches play a vital role within the religious community, embodying unique faith and theology that epitomize God's love for all. Despite the challenges posed by declining membership, these churches persevere through faith and hope, guided by the words of theologian Jurgen Moltmann's assertion that "True hope is lived in the giving of oneself to the future of the hopeless... Faith is manifested in love for those in need"(Moltmann 1977, 195). This hope in Jesus Christ serves as a guiding light for rural churches, motivating them to persevere despite the threat of closure due to dwindling membership. It underscores the enduring hope and faith that sustain rural churches amidst declining membership.

My research project showed that rural churches demonstrate resilience through various innovations, sustaining ministries, and revitalizing programs. Rather than focusing solely on increasing membership, churches like Olpe United Methodist and Madison Global Methodist prioritize serving their communities, embracing relational ministry and spiritual growth. These churches recognize the value of community outreach in addressing the threat of declining membership and prioritizing care for individuals over fear of losing members.

Although immediate growth may not be realized, the overarching objective is understanding how rural churches can thrive despite declining membership. Over time, incremental growth may occur as churches disciple their members and continue supporting their communities. For example, Olpe United Methodist Church's commitment to enhancing ministries and supporting the community sustains its membership, serving as a symbol of strength for the Olpe community.

Similarly, Madison Global Methodist Church invests in media ministry and introduces new study groups to sustain and potentially increase membership gradually. Meanwhile, Ebenezer Global Methodist Church remains resilient despite a slight membership decline, leveraging innovation and strategic shifts in ministry practices to flourish. Through community outreach, compassionate programs, and steadfast commitment to spreading God's word, these churches exemplify the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, rural churches may face challenges like membership decline, but they thrive by remaining steadfast in their faith and adapting to change while staying true to their identity. Through revitalized ministries and intentional outreach, rural churches will continue to flourish and serve their communities faithfully.

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